

ON LEONG MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION
(Pui Tak Center)
2216 South Wentworth Avenue
Chicago
Cook
Illinois

HABS IL-325
IL-325

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ON LEONG MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION (Pui Tak Center)

HABS No. IL-325

Location: 2216 South Wentworth Avenue, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.

Significance: Built in 1927, the On Leong Merchants Association stands today as a visual landmark to Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood. Designed with traditional Chinese architectural details, the building played an important role for the community for over eighty years, providing a variety of services to the Chinatown merchants and residents.

Description: The On Leong Merchants Association features lush facades clad on two sides by a riot of richly colored terra cotta decoration based on Chinese prototypes and symbolism, custom made by the American Terra Cotta Company. The terra cotta itself is similar to a glazed clay material known in China as liu li. The animals, figures, foliage, and patterns were chosen to represent Confucian virtues, but the interior plan is uniquely American, drawing inspiration from the union halls that were built for many trade organizations around Chicago in the early twentieth century. As in a union hall, the On Leong building features ground-floor retail below two stories of meeting rooms, offices and classrooms.

History: By the early twentieth century, Chinese immigrants in Chicago had been forced out of the city center and into traditionally poor outlying areas. One such neighborhood developed around Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road, and became what is now known as Chinatown.

Marginalized in high crime neighborhoods and shunned by their American-born neighbors, Chicago's Chinese residents increasingly relied on the support of their own community organizations. The On Leong Merchants Association, whose name translates to "Prosperity peaceful conduct," made itself the center of cultural activity in Chinatown, offered Chinese classes for children and services for new immigrants, organized community celebrations, and established an informal judicial system to resolve disputes between members.

In the spring of 1926, the firm of Michealsen and Rognstad was hired to design the association's new building in the heart of Chinatown. The architects faced a difficult task at On Leong. The association wanted a building with a traditional Chinese style, but one that would serve functions not commonly required in traditional Chinese architecture. They needed to design a facility that could host a vast number of people undertaking a wide variety of activities, including retail, offices, a residential hotel, a religious shrine, and three large meeting halls.

Today the On Leong Merchants Association continues to serve as a neighborhood center providing services to Chicago's Chinatown community.

Sources:

Sinkevitch, Alice. *ALA Guide to Chicago*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993.

On Leong Merchants Association Building: 2216 South Wentworth Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Chicago: Commission on Chicago Landmarks, September 1988.